

What really happened in Beirut?

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Armed clashes between Opposition and Loyalist forces in Lebanon last month left up to 84 people dead and raised fears of a renewal of the civil war that devastated the country between 1975 and 1991. But Lebanon's current crisis, of which the recent confrontations were but a manifestation, connects not only to the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah, but also to the heavy involvement of regional and international powers, including Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the US and France.

Some background

Since the end of the Civil War, Lebanon has hardly been a calm and stable country. During the last three decades, political alliances have repeatedly changed in unpredictable ways, and so have the regional and international 'rules of the game', which have historically had a big role in Lebanese politics. The 1989 Taif Agreement, which in theory provided "the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy" in Lebanon, was in practice designed to accommodate the demographic shift to a Muslim majority and the Saudi influence, to legitimise the *de facto* Syrian occupation of Lebanon, and reassert Lebanese authority in South Lebanon, then occupied by Israel.

In June 1982, the Israeli army invaded South Lebanon following an assassination attempt against Israel's ambassador to the UK by a Palestinian faction (Fatah - The Revolutionary Council, headed by Abu Nidal, then one of Yassir Arafat's main rivals). Surrounded in West Beirut and subject to heavy bombardment, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Syrian forces negotiated a passage from Lebanon with the aid of international 'peacekeeping' forces. In May 1983, Israel and Lebanon, with US 'assistance', reached an accord that set the stage to withdraw Israeli forces from Lebanon, while letting them patrol, together with the Lebanese Army, a 'security zone' which Israel claimed was a necessary 'buffer' against Palestinian attacks on its northern territory. The instruments of ratification were never exchanged, however, and in March 1984, under pressure from Syria, Lebanon cancelled the agreement. In January 1985, Israel started to withdraw most of its troops, leaving a small Israeli force and an Israeli-supported militia (the mainly Christian South Lebanon Army led by Sa'd Haddad and then Antoine Lahd) in the occupied areas of South Lebanon.

The Israeli invasion is popularly held to be the major catalyst for the creation of Hezbollah, which, by 1991, was the only armed militia in Lebanon not supported by Israel and, by 2000, had completely replaced the vanquished PLO in the South. In its 1985 manifesto, Hezbollah listed its three main goals as the eradication of "Western colonialism" in Lebanon (meaning

Israel and its allies); bringing to justice those who had “committed atrocities” during the civil war (specifically the Phalangists and Lebanese Forces); and the establishment of an Islamic government in Lebanon. Since then, Hezbollah has apparently abandoned the goal of transforming Lebanon into an Islamic state.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Hezbollah receives its financial support mainly from the donations of Lebanese Shiites. According to frequent accounts in the Western press, however, the group receives all or most of its support from Iran and Syria. In any case, what started as a Shiite militia has now grown into a political party with seats in the Lebanese government, a radio and a satellite TV station and extensive social programmes and services, while keeping, at the same time, a highly organised and trained paramilitary wing. The liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 and the July 2006 war, in which Israel was defeated, further boosted Hizbullah’s popularity as a legitimate resistance movement, not only among the poor and marginalised Lebanese Shiite community, but throughout Lebanon and the Arab world. Nonetheless, six countries continue to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, which is said to receive weapons, money and training from Iran and Syria. The “self-appointed anti-terrorism vanguards”, as one commentator described them, include the US, the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia and, of course, Israel.

On 14 February, 2005, the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated in a truck bomb attack, which killed 21 and wounded nearly 100. It was the second such incident in four months and one of many in recent years. With close ties to the Saudi, French and American ruling elites, al-Hariri was a billionaire and business tycoon who dominated the country’s post-war political and economic life and is credited, by some, for ‘reconstructing’ the capital Beirut and, by others, for widespread corruption and fraud. During his time as prime minister, the public debt rose from \$2.5 billion to over \$40 billion and the economic growth slowed from 8% to -1%, while most major industries and public services were privatised and taken over by foreign companies.

Al-Hariri’s assassination, however, sparked mass protests that seemed to unite a big number of groups and parties that were otherwise divided or even at war. A chain of demonstrations and ‘protest camps’, especially in Beirut, have become to be known as the ‘Cedar Revolution’ – a term coined by the US Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula J. Dobriansky in a news conference, and used to draw a comparison with the ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia and the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine [1].

Adopting a blue ribbon as its symbol and “Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence” as a motto, the primary goals of the ‘Cedar Revolution’ were the withdrawal of Syrian troops (around 14,000 soldiers and intelligence agents at the time) from Lebanon; the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of al-Hariri; the resignation of security officials to ensure the success of the plan; and to hold new, free parliamentary elections. In addition, many also called for the return of former prime minister and chief of staff Michel Aoun, who had been in exile since 1989, and the release of the imprisoned Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja’ja’ (or Geagea) as goals of the ‘revolution’.

On March 14th, the one-month memorial of the assassination, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese rallied in central Beirut, chanting “Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence” and carrying a huge Lebanese flag. The rally was considered to be “the largest demonstration ever seen in Lebanon”, with estimations of a turn-out ranging from 1.2 to 1.5 million people.

A few days before, on March 8th, a massive rally had been called by Hezbollah. With an estimated turn-out of 200,000 to 500,000 pro-Syrian demonstrators, it dwarfed the earlier anti-Syrian events organised by the Hariri camp. In addition to showing off the extent of popular support for Syria in Lebanon, the demonstration reiterated Hezbollah's rejection of UN Resolution 1559, whose call for the disbanding of all Lebanese militias threatens Hizbullah's military wing, and accused Israel and the United States of "meddling in the Lebanese internal affairs."

On 26 April that year, the last Syrian troops and intelligence agents crossed the border withdrawing from Lebanon in line with Resolution 1559, adopted in September of 2004. But the international tribunal continues to be a throne for Syria and a political fiasco on the international level. For despite the lack of any substantial evidence to date implicating any party, the Syrian government has borne the brunt of Lebanese and international outrage at the murder, because of its extensive military and intelligence influence in Lebanon, as well as an alleged public rift between al-Hariri and Damascus just before his last resignation on in October 2004. Lebanese Durzi leader Walid Jumblat, who was until recently a close ally of Syria, alleged in the wake of the assassination that, in August 2004, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad threatened al-Hariri saying "[President of Lebanon] Lahoud is me. ... If you and Chirac want me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon." Jumblat was quoted saying "When I heard him telling us those words, I knew that it was his condemnation of death."

In the subsequent parliamentary elections held in May and June 2005, the "Martyr Rafiq al-Hariri" list included the Future Movement, led by Rafiq al-Hariri's son Sa'd (Sunni); the Lebanese Forces, led by Samir Ja'ja' (Christian Maronite); the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), led by Walid Jumblat (Durzi); the reformed Phalanges (al-Kata'eb party), led by former president Amine Gemayel (Christian Maronite); as well as other minor political parties. The Coalition also tactically allied with the Shiite Hizbullah and Amal against General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM, Christian Maronite) and his pro-Syrian allies and subsequently gained a majority in Parliament. The tactical alliance with Hizbullah and Amal would soon end and these majority parties and movements (the Loyalists) would later form the so-called March 14 Alliance, opposed to the March 8 Coalition (or Opposition), which now includes Hizbullah, Amal, the FPM, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP, secular) and other minor parties and groups.

In July 2005, a new government was formed by Western-backed Fu'ad Seniora, who had been appointed by the then president Emile Lahoud. All the main political blocs were included in it except for the FPM-led bloc. In November 2006, five Shiite ministers from Hezbollah and Amal resigned after the collapse of talks on giving the Opposition more say in government. On December 1st, supporters of Hezbollah, Amal and FPM started a 'protest camp' outside the office of PM Seniora, in an open-ended campaign to topple his government. In November 2007, Emile Lahoud left the presidential palace at the end of his term without a successor being elected. The following day his cabinet assumed "executive powers". On December 5th, Parliament Speaker and leader of Amal Nabih Barri announced that rival Lebanese leaders had agreed on General Michel Suleiman, the army's chief of staff, as president, although the parliament had yet to elect him. As late as 22 April, 2008, the parliament had failed, for the 18th time, to hold a vote to elect the agreed-on president.

Timed bomb?

What sparked the May events in Lebanon was a surprising speech by the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblat MP on May 5th, in which he revealed that Hezbollah was operating a “secret, illegitimate telecommunication network”, including “hidden cameras” at the Hariri international airport in southern Beirut. Backed by other pro-government leaders, he considered this a “violation of the country’s sovereignty” and demanded that the network is dismantled. The following day, the Ministerial Council opened an investigation into the issue and immediately took two decisions: to dismiss the airport’s security chief, General Wafiq Shqeir, who belongs to opposition Shiite group Amal and is said to be close to Hezbollah, and to dismantle Hezbollah’s “illegal” telecommunication network.

Needless to say, the story was quickly picked up by Western mainstream media and soon everyone was quoting Condoleezza Rice, George Bush, Nicolas Sarkozy and other ‘concerned’ politicians saying that Hezbollah was carrying out “illegal activities” and running “a state within a state”.

There is a lot of speculation as to why Jumblat and the Loyalists triggered their “bomb” now. Some said it was merely a “retaliation” for the detention of French Socialist Party spokesman Karim Pakzad, who was held and questioned by Hezbollah members for over 5 hours on April 27th, as he was caught driving through the southern suburb of Beirut and taking pictures. Others went that the aim was to “clear” the airport’s security staff from “Opposition eyes”, so that Loyalist forces could smuggle in American and Israeli weapons through Jordan and Saudi Arabia, similar to what was allegedly happening after the Summer War with Israel under the cover of humanitarian aid. In this context, General Michel Aoun warned, as the escalations started, that “strange planes” were landing at night at the abandoned Ba’dran airport in the mainly Durzi area of Shouf.

Others went further and talked about a wider American-Israeli-Saudi plot to drag Hezbollah, and behind it Syria and Iran, into a bloody conflict, using Hezbollah’s ‘illegitimate’ arms and the sectarian tensions as a pretext. In this context, Hezbollah-owned al-Manar TV exposed, quoting American diplomatic sources, an “American-Saudi plan” that Sa’d al-Hariri allegedly came back with after he was “summoned” to Washington. The report claimed that the procedures included electing Michel Suleiman as president, “whether the opposition agreed or not”, coinciding with massing American troops at the Syrian-Iraqi border and accelerating the international tribunal into the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in order to “frighten” the Syrian regime and prevent it from any unwanted reactions, as well as issuing “strong statements” about the Syrian nuclear programme. These would finally culminate, as the report had it, in “ground operations” by loyal security forces, supported by al-Hariri’s and Jumblat’s militias, against opposition positions and institutions that the government deems illegitimate, such as Hezbollah’s telecommunication network [2].

Reports further claimed that the plan was coordinated by a former American diplomat in Beirut, who had reportedly supervised, along with Saudi and Jordanian intelligence services, the training of Lebanese militias in Jordan and other Arab countries [3].

It is also worth mentioning that both the American and Saudi governments had warned their citizens in Lebanon, prior to the events, to “be careful” and “leave the country”. Besides, the deployment of US warships near the Lebanese coast since late February made the Opposition suspect that something serious was being planned (guided missile destroyer USS Cole took station off Lebanon’s coast on 28 February, 2008, as the first of an anticipated three-ship flotilla).

French website Geopolitique.com has since published a map supposedly showing the Hizbullah telecom network, which not only connects South Lebanon to South Beirut (the Suburb, as it is called, which is a Hizbullah stronghold) but also extends to the eastern and northern parts of the country [4]. The map was allegedly prepared by Telecommunication Minister Marwan Hammadeh, who is a member of Jumblat's party, with the help of Lebanese intelligence services. The website editor, Guillaume Dasquié, said the map was obtained from "sources close to Jumblat" and added that it had already been circulating among international capitals, such as Paris and Washington, since March 2008.

Another news site, run by Syrian dissident journalist Nizar Nayouf, also published a copy of the map, dated 17 January 2008 and addressed, in Hebrew, to the Israeli Foreign Ministry and marked in red with a "top secret" stamp [5]. The Hebrew version had 7 pages, of which the website only obtained the first two, and presumed that the missing pages contained further information and maps/pictures of the Hizbullah telecom network.

According to Hizbullah, however, its telecom network had existed before 2000, but was enhanced afterwards and played a crucial role in defeating Israel in the July 2006 war. It further insists that the Lebanese government has been aware of it, so bringing it up now must have been "politically motivated".

In any case, legal commentators have wondered why "supposedly secret documents" would reach the hands of politicians who would "exploit them for media and political gains", instead of carrying out a "real investigation" supervised by the concerned judicial and security bodies. "Even if the information Jumblat exposed were true," they added, "leaking it to the media and the public would surely affect the investigation and legal process" and "as a member of parliament, Jumblat should be aware of that."

Easy victory

In his speech, Hasan Nasrallah considered the government's decisions a "declaration of war" against the Opposition and an attempt to "strip the Resistance of its arms." Later on, he said that "any hand that will touch the arms of Resistance will be cut off". A decision was taken to close down the Beirut airport and the road leading to it, as well as some other key roads to and from Beirut, until the government has backed down. A few "protest camps" were also set up, similar to the one that had been going on in the city centre for over a year and a half.

Incidentally, May 7th was also a work strike led by country's union federation to demand higher wages and decry high prices. The Opposition had thrown their weight behind the strike, which paralysed large parts of the capital Beirut. Around the city, protesters blocked roads with barricades and burning tires.

Some minor clashes erupted between Loyalist and Opposition supporters in west Beirut, with insults exchanged and stones thrown at each other. A few hours later, a few hand grenades were thrown at various Oppositions areas and at the central protest camp, while also threatening to shoot protesters if they passed through the Mazra'a corniche. The use of weapons by Loyalists was seen by the Opposition as a "golden opportunity" to "move".

The Opposition moves gradually became more systematic, with Amal and SSNP militiamen,

backed by the more experienced Hizbullah fighters, sweeping Shiite areas and advancing to occupy a couple of Future Movement positions, using limited fires. Surprised by the ease with which they achieved that, and sensing that the army was not intending to interfere against them, they kept on advancing to occupy Loyalists positions one after the other.

While most Western mainstream media were 'reporting' that "the Iran- and Syria-backed Shiite militia" had "taken over" west Beirut, often adding the words "which is mostly inhabited by Sunnis" (it is, in fact, a patchwork of Sunni and Shiite areas), what happened on the ground was quite different. Opposition forces were surrounding Loyalist positions and strongholds, often without entering them, and terrorising their fighters into giving up without causing huge casualties on either side. In fact, most Loyalist fighters threw their weapons and surrendered voluntarily or fled away.

Thus, all the buildings taken and the weapons seized by Opposition forces were immediately handed over to the army or military intelligence, in a move that was described by many as "unprecedented" in the history of armed conflicts in Lebanon. It was, further, a concrete proof that Hizbullah had no intention of seizing power or undertaking a *coup d'état*, as many politicians and media outlets were screaming at the time.

Opposition commanders had estimated that, in case of similar scenarios, there would be about 50 main "contact points" at or near positions and building belonging to the Future movement, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Lebanese Forces. It was also estimated that these would have about 3,000 fighters, in addition to some 900 security forces loyal to them that may join in. With an average of 10 casualties per contact point, it was estimated that there would be at least 500 casualties on both sides. But as the day went on, this proved to be an overestimation. By the end of the day, al-Jazeera reported that the day saw only 6 dead and about 10 wounded.

On Thursday (May 8th), as the government did not respond to Nasrallah's demands made in a sharp and determined speech, Opposition forces advanced further to seize more Loyalist positions but there were clear orders to spare the palaces of the Loyalist leaders (Jumblat, al-Hariri etc.). By nightfall, central Beirut was under the control of Opposition forces, with the Future Movement's main headquarters having fallen into their hands. Some sporadic fire exchanges continued to be heard here and there, while Opposition vehicles carrying heavy anti-aircraft guns strolled down the Hamra Street.

At the Hariri-owned Future TV and newspaper offices in Burj al-Murr, where around 420 Future militiamen were stationed and refused to surrender, fires were exchanged until the early morning, when Opposition forces took control and handed them over to the army. A while later, the 4th floor was set on fire by SSNP militiamen. In retaliation, the following day Future militiamen executed and mutilated 11 SSNP unarmed members, who had surrendered their weapons at one of their offices in Halba, north Lebanon [6].

Other horrific scenes that did not often make it to the Western media reports included: PSP militiamen kidnapping 3 Hizbullah members and executing two of them, then dumping their mutilated bodies outside a hospital in 'Aley, Mount Lebanon, for which Jumblat later "apologised"; Loyalist snipers on top of buildings in various parts of Beirut shooting at civilians; Loyalist gunmen randomly shooting at residential areas in the Mazra'a and Barbour areas, for example; Future militiamen setting Opposition supporters' houses on fire in Tripoli; PSP militiamen taking hostage two vehicles, with women and children on board, but later releasing them. Of significance also was the resignation of PSP's central security

commander, Marwan Sa'ib, who accused Jumblat of "betraying the cause" and called upon other members to follow suit.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council, pushed by the Americans and the French, made a hasty statement condemning Hizbullah and supporting the Seniora government. The latter, however, agreed to refer its two decisions that sparked the conflict to the army, which decided, minutes later, to revoke them and reinstate General Shqeir as the chief of the airport's security. In response, the Opposition accepted to remove all armed presence but promised to keep the "civil disobedience" going and Sunday (May 11th) was declared a day of "national strike". By Saturday evening, however, Beirut was almost calm again, having been "cleared of armed men and trouble makers". Sporadic clashes would still continue in other parts of the country over the few following days. Overall, 84 people were killed and some 200 wounded. Among the dead were 16 civilians, 27 Loyalist and 39 Opposition fighters.

With the surprising fast fall of their forces and the apparent failure of their move, Loyalist leaders seemed to back down, now talking, with a clear change in tone, about peace and dialogue. PM Seniora is quoted to have said that "it did not deserve all this fuss" and al-Hariri that "there was a misunderstanding". But the most surprising statements came from Jumblat, the man who more or less started it all. According to the head of al-Jazeera office in Beirut Ghassan bin Jiddo, Jumblat asked the Qatari prime minister to "convey a message" to Nasrallah saying that "the conflict between us is temporary" and that "the [Druze] Mount will always cover the back of Resistance and Beirut will remain its cradle"! Indeed, as one Lebanese commentator put it, "Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah speaks as if there is no future, but March 14 government coalition leaders, Walid Jumblat, Saad Hariri and Fouad Seniora, speak as if there is no past." [7]

What's more, there seemed to be strong divisions now inside the Loyalist camp. According to an article in al-Diyar newspaper, which is considered close to the Syrian government, by journalist Johnny Mnayyer, who is nonetheless credited for his credibility and objectivity, a meeting at al-Hariri's palace in Qreitim, on the night Beirut 'fell', saw heated arguments between the different Loyalist ministers. A minister from the Hariri's Future Movement accused Jumblat of "embroiling the government" in this "miscalculated step", adding "we thought Jumblat had consulted with the major capitals but it turned out that they were very angry with what we did." A PSP minister then replied that it wasn't only them to blame as the decisions were taken by everyone, including Seniora and al-Hariri, to which the first replied "You know PM Seniora did not want to take those two decisions but, when Jumblat declared his escalatory positions, he and the government could do nothing but ride the wave." [8]

What remains there to say is that painting what happened as a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, which is what most Western media and news agencies did, is completely rubbish. First of all, this greatly misrepresents the composition of the Opposition and Loyalist blocs, which are more diverse and complex in terms of religions and sects. Secondly, the support for Hizbullah is not confined to the Shiite community in Beirut or Lebanon. It was very significant that the so-called Sunni street in Beirut did not show any signs of protest against the Opposition move or solidarity with al-Hariri and his government as the self-appointed representatives of Sunnis. In fact, there were many Sunnis and Christians fighting alongside Hizbullah and Amal Shiite fighters. When Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja' (Geagea) read out a statement of the March 14 Alliance, praising the "heroism of Beirut's Sunnis" fighting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon back in 1982, many

Sunni Lebanese appeared on Arab TV channels attacking Ja'ja', who is a Christian Maronite, and reminding us that he was a "partner of [the then Israeli defense minister Ariel] Sharon in his massacres against the Sunnis of Beirut". Similarly, the imam of the Quds mosque in Sidon, who is a well-respected Sunni authority, appeared in a televised interview on al-Jazeera and confirmed that "there were many Sunnis fighting the government militias alongside Hizbullah", adding that "what is going on now is an American-Saudi-Egyptian-Jordanian war against Hizbullah because it is resisting Israel."

Yet, each camp is now trying to portray the events as a victory for its political doctrine. While Opposition media have been giving the impression that the only loser in these last confrontations was the American-Israeli project in the region, and blaming al-Hariri, Jumblat and "their lot" for "what Beirutians had to go through", the Loyalist media are portraying the events as a "pre-planned attack by Shiite militias on a Sunni city". Moreover, Future Movement cadres have been going around telling locals that those who attacked Beirut were "Iranians and spoke Persian", and that's why the "Future guys" could not defend "their city".

Many of those who jumped to condemn the burning of the *Future TV* offices, blaming Hizbullah for a crime committed by SSNP militiamen, often did so with implicit (and sometimes explicit) ideological or political messages, which made it difficult to believe they were sincere in their defending of the freedom of the press. As one commentator put it, "none of them adopted the freedom of the press cause when [Hizbullah-owned] *al-Manar TV* was prohibited in France, the land of freedom and democracy, and none of them raised their voice when *al-Manar* was bombed by Israel during the Summer War." More seriously, almost none of them mentioned that the Hariri-owned channel had not only been a mouthpiece for one-sided political propaganda, but also a factory for cheap sectarian rhetoric that renders all talk about the "the martyrs of the freedom of the press" a bad joke.

As Samah Idris, the editor-in-chief of the Beirut-based *al-Aadab* magazine, put it in an interview on *Electronic Intifada*: "Clearly there is a strategy from the government and pro-government forces to portray Hizbullah as the outsiders; to try to portray Hizbullah as a force coming to change the nature of Beirut by bringing in Shiite elements, Iranian elements, Persian elements, barbarian elements... all oriental stereotypes that mainstream Western media and some mainstream Arab media will quickly adopt." He then adds, "It is not certain, however, that this portrayal of Hizbullah could work in the Arab media because Hizbullah is widely respected as the major defender of the Arab cause, of the Palestinian cause." [9]

Shock

There is a lot of speculation as to why the Loyalist militias were defeated so easily and quickly. The surrender of over 800 Future militiamen in Beirut within 5 hours on the first day of 'confrontations', and the fleeing of many before even firing a shot, was definitely a shock to the Loyalist leaders and their international allies alike. The American administration was reportedly "disappointed" with the Loyalists' performance and their inability to hold up against the first (counter)attack by Opposition forces. It was, further, not very happy with the way the army reacted. In a televised interview with *al-Arabiya TV*, George Bush said "I am not satisfied with the army", but added that "we will train and support the [Lebanese] troops in order for them to be able to protect the country and protect the [Seniora]

government.” Many saw in that a stark reminiscent of Reagan’s talk of supporting Amine Gemayel and his ‘democracy’ in the 1980s, during the Lebanese civil war.

In any case, it seems that the major decision-making capitals (Washington, Paris, Riyadh, Egypt etc.) had not anticipated the swift and decisive reaction of the Opposition, nor had they expected that Loyalist militias would fall or surrender so quickly and so easily. Many analysts and observers have since argued that the Seniora government’s allies were betting on more “classical scenarios”, such as that the confrontations would last for a few days, or weeks, with a disturbing increase in casualties, which would allow the ‘international community’ to push for ‘international intervention’. Then the big players would find it easy to take decisive measures, either through Resolution 1701 and the so-called international peacekeeping forces (UNIFEL), or in more direct, more blatant ways (like a simultaneous Israeli attack on Hizbullah in the south). And that may explain the reason why they were all ‘disappointed’ that Loyalist militias did not hold up and why al-Hariri was told by American officials, when he allegedly asked for “help”, that “we move according to our timetable not yours.”

It was also significant that, during the events, Palestinian factions in Lebanon “warned” Loyalists not to “embroil the Palestinian [refugee] camps in the battles”, and that Israel reportedly refused American and French “requests” to attack Hizbullah simultaneously.

It is said that, for months, Hizbullah had been planning a “proactive” and “swift” operation to “contain” Loyalist militias in case they started to “make troubles” with the aim of dragging Hizbullah into an internal armed conflict. One of these plans, which suggested that the capital Beirut would “fall within minutes”, is said to have been drafted by Hizbullah’s head of security Imad Mughniyeh, who was assassinated in Damascus last February with fingers pointing to the Israeli Mossad and other intelligence services (namely, those of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and possibly the US). [10]

This, however, does not seem sufficient to explain why the Future militia crumbled so quickly. It is as important to note that many of those who fought against the Opposition in the May events were people travelled to Beirut by the Future Movement from extremely impoverished areas, like Akkar in northern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley in the east. As some of them later admitted on TV screens, they were offered money to fight against Hizbullah in Beirut. In certain cases, they were not even aware, prior to arriving in Beirut, that they were coming to fight but thought they were brought to fill labour positions.

Last month, Los Angeles Times also revealed that Saad al-Hariri’s Future movement, with the help of the Bush administration, has built a Sunni militia, under the guise of private security companies, to counter Hezbollah and protect their turf in a potential military confrontation. “Over the last year,” the report by Borzou Daragahi and Raed Rafei said, “Secure Plus went from a small security company to an organization with 3,000 employees and unofficial associates on the payroll, mostly poor Sunnis from the country’s north. Some were armed with pistols and assault rifles. [...] In beige pants and maroon shirts, [they] were drilled for months in basic military training, including hand-to-hand combat. At least two dozen informal offices were opened in Beirut. [...] For a monthly salary of at least \$350, they served eight hours a day guarding offices, patrolling neighborhoods on motorcycles, communicating via walkie-talkie and remaining on call to defend against threats to Sunni neighborhoods or offices of the Future bloc.” [11]

The deal(s)

Following intensive negotiations on the national, regional and international levels, a two-stage settlement between the Loyalists and the Opposition seemed to develop. First, in an exceptional session on May 15th, the government revoked its two decisions concerning Hizbullah's telecommunication network, while the Opposition started to remove street blockades and reopen the airport and closed roads. The second stage was to resume the "Lebanese dialogue" and end the 18-month-long political crisis. This time, however, and although all Arab, regional and international powers put their weight behind the initiative, the direct mediator was not Syria, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but the tiny American-backed and Israeli-friendly state of Qatar.

On May 21st, after five days of intensive negotiations, all parties agreed on what has become to be known as the Doha Agreement, which was met with open arms by all Lebanese, Arab and international players alike. The two camps agreed to immediately elect Michel Suleiman, the former chief of staff, as president; to form a new "national unity government", in which the Opposition has 11 ministers out of 30 (the "guaranteeing third" that had been their main demand and at the heart of the political crisis); and to formulate a modified electoral system, in which administrative districts are regarded as electoral constituencies (according to the 1960 law).

Although the agreement did not have anything specific to say regarding Hizbullah's arms but merely said that "all parties should refrain from resorting to the use of arms and violence in any conflicts that may arise and under any circumstances" and that "security and military powers should be exclusively in the hands of the state". It did, however, open the door for "further dialogue" in regard to the 'illegitimate arms' once a president is elected and a new government is formed. Of course, there was no specific mention of which arms were meant but everyone understood it meant Hizbullah's, as all the fuss has been about this and everyone seems to have forgotten that almost all other factions on both sides have militias and arms too, which have so often been pointed at and used against fellow countrymen and women.

While the agreement was painted in many media reports as a "victory for the Syrian-Iranian axis" and "an acknowledgement of Nasrallah as Lebanon's *de facto* president", more serious analysts argued that it came on a "no winner, no loser" basis. Indeed, the Doha settlement was a much-needed truce to avoid a possible catastrophe, but it fell extremely short of long-term steps to tackle the core problems that could easily resurface in the near or far future.

In fact, the Doha agreement was primarily yet another readjustment of the sectarian balance of power in Lebanon that takes place periodically to accommodate the changing political (and demographic) strength of the different sects in the country, which is only possible under international consent (the fact that the 'election' of the new president on May 25th turned into an internationally attended ceremony is a testimony to that). As Suleiman Takkiyydeen wrote in *al-Safir* newspaper on May 24th, "We are faced with yet another attempt to save the sectarian system whose success, even in the short run, seems impossible once the main national issues that require a national and social contract return to the fore." [12]

Besides, for a more lasting agreement in Lebanon, it is critical to have a regional and international consensus, meaning basically a deal between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Iran and Syria on the other. But as a major deal involving these powers does not seem feasible at the moment (despite the start of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations via Turkey), it was obvious that the Doha agreement made little attempt to address the core

issues at the heart of the conflict, namely the fate of Hizbullah's arms and the future policy of the country *vis-a-vis* the larger conflict(s) in the Middle East. As Nicolas Nassif wrote in *al-Akhbar* on May 23rd, "According to insiders privy to the Qatari mediation, a settlement was reached without overstepping two thresholds beyond which no resolution of the crisis could have been acceptable: A Saudi one that demanded an agreement in accordance with the Taif Accord and protects the constitutional powers [particularly of the Sunni prime minister] ... and a Syrian threshold that insisted on excluding an attempt to undermine Hizbullah's arms. And the Doha accord respected those two stipulations." [13]

It was of some significance, however, that the new president, who was received with unprecedented welcoming both inside and outside Lebanon, stressed in his first speech after swearing in on "the importance of preserving the Resistance" and "benefiting from its experience" in "the country's defence strategy", stressing, at the same time, that the "Lebanese gun would only be pointed at the [country's] enemy and not anyone else."

The former head of the army is widely seen as a unifying figure in Lebanon, where nearly every other politician is considered to be either pro- or anti-Syrian, pro- or anti-American and so on. He has earned respect from both the Opposition and the Loyalists after refusing to deploy the military to crack down on mass pro- and anti-Syrian demonstrations in March 2005, following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, and again in the recent events against Opposition forces. During the 34-day war between Hezbollah and Israel in July 2006, the military also stood back.

So, a few days later, the parliamentary majority (the Loyalists) agreed to keep Fu'ad Seniora as prime minister in the new "national unity government", despite their agreement earlier to name the Future Movement's leader Sa'd al-Hariri. Reports have it that this "change in choice" came after "phone calls from Saudi Arabia and the US, which imposed on the Loyalists the nomination of Seniora, 'their man in Lebanon', as [US Assistant Secretary of State] David Welch once put it." And despite objecting to his nomination, the Opposition confirmed that they would still take part in the new government. General Michel Aoun, for example, was quoted saying "the nomination of Seniora is a continuation of the past and is a title for disagreement and not agreement, which the new era should begin with."

As to the 'ordinary people' in Lebanon, who had been nervously following news reports on TV screens and radios, they were certainly relieved to have avoided another bloody war that would have devastated their lives and homes. On the day the Doha agreement was signed, people could be heard congratulating each other, albeit with a touch cynicism or sarcasm sometimes. Some even gave away free drinks or sweets, while others patiently watched out for future developments to decide whether this was yet another short-term precarious truce or a serious step towards a long-term solution.

In any case, the real, undeclared deal seemed to lie elsewhere. On May 26th, in a speech commemorating the 8th anniversary of the liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation, Hasan Nasrallah said, after reiterating his positions on the Resistance and its arms, that "[Hizbullah] does not want to seize power in Lebanon, or to govern Lebanon, or control Lebanon." Turning to the Future Movement's leader Sa'd al-Hariri, and after praising his father for his "great mind", he asked him to "learn from the great experience of that great man, [...] who was able to balance between the construction project and the resistance project." [14] In effect, Nasrallah was offering al-Hariri Junior, whom everyone thought at the time to be the next prime minister, what some commentators described as "an exchange deal" and "a Mafia-style trade-off": we take care of our resistance and you

stick to your 'development' project and no one interferes with the other's business, which was the case during the father's days or, more precisely, during the 'Syrian reign' in Lebanon.

Under the title "Rejected exchange", Khaled Saghiyeh wrote in the Left-leaning Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar* on May 29th: "An exchange of this kind between Hizbullah and the Future movement would only be achieved at the expense of the marginalised classes in Lebanon. [...] Although Nasrallah reminded [the government] that he had asked it, back in 2000, to take care of the development of the deprived [Shiite] areas [...] and that it has not fulfilled its duties in those areas, [...] he did not go into the details of the systematic rip-off by an alliance of contractors and bankers under the umbrella of construction, after bribing the leaders of the Loyalists and the Opposition alike, as well as the Syrian intelligence officers. Today they want the Lebanese people to accept going back to those wrongful economic policies, and the strategies of systematic theft, in exchange for leaving the Resistance alone." [15]

Notes:

[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1911-2005Mar2.html>

[2] <http://www.almanar.com.lb/NewsSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=43128>

[3] http://www.syriatruth.org/Al-Hakikah/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13

[4]

<http://www.geopolitique.com/editorial/exclusif-la-carte-du-reseau-telecom-du-hezbollah-761.html>

[5] http://syriatruth.org/Al-Hakikah/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3559

[6] <http://www.ssnp.info/article.php?id=38308>

[7] <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9530.shtml>

[8] <http://www.tayyar.org/Tayyar/News/PoliticalNews/ar-LB/128551931449364291.htm>

[9] <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9527.shtml>

[10] <http://www.albaladonline.com/viewer.php?edition=1449&page=2> and

http://syriatruth.org/Al-Hakikah/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2834

[11]

http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-security12-2008may12_0,6458359.story?page=1

[12] <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=945&ChannelId=21433&ArticleId=2360>

[13] <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/74735>

[14] <http://www.almanar.com.lb/NewsSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=44512&language=ar>

[15] <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/75302>

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